

----- FIRST TALK -----

on

Canadian Art
Series.

June Savage

-1-

In giving these talks on Canadian Art I would like at the beginning to say that they will not be a technical discussion of Art, but merely an effort to bring before you some of the obvious aspects of this all-delightful topic, as it should appeal to us as Canadians - and perhaps bring us into closer contact with the people who made it possible for us to have an Art, which can be called Canadian, as it reveals to us the characteristics of our own land.

Many of us, I think, feel that Art is outside our world, and yet, to-day, we are surrounded by so much that is the direct product of the Artist's and Designer's mind that every strand of our lives is interwoven with it. The whole world of manufactured goods carries the stamp of the artist, - so, too, do our clothes and everything we touch or use in our homes that ministers to our physical comfort and to our aesthetic taste. The fact that the height of our hats and the length of our skirts, the tone of our walls and the texture of our curtains, the ply of our rugs and the construction of our furniture are all controlled by the artist, shows how susceptible we all are to line and form and colour.

It is a language which we use constantly but very often innocently, and in this field we are called upon to make decisions all the time. That new room - what am I going to do about it? It is cold and dreary on the north exposure, - it needs something to brighten it up, - creamy walls, I thought, and some of those lovely woven fabrics that fall so well and have such fine colour might be used for the curtains, yellow or beige, to keep the background light and give an illusion of sunshine. The dark brown notes of the furniture and the warm

-2-

tones of the rug make a cozy setting. But the room needs an escape from the enclosed four walls, - some channel through which the spirit can slip away to refreshment and delight. We must have a picture. Over the fire-place, I should think, in a conspicuous spot where the light is good, and so we come to the problem, - what picture shall we get?

Nowadays, one can obtain very fine prints of the old masters, beautiful in colour and tone, but if you feel that your wall space is not to be darkened by a heavy mass in an over-elaborate frame, - then you will search for the painters who will give you something fresh and vital in colour and design, and, framed in a simple, light moulding, will keep the wall space larger, - and fit harmoniously into the light background. Van Gogh may satisfy your love for yellow in his sun flowers, - or perhaps you favour the blue Italian sky of Perugini or Giotto. It is difficult to make a choice, - but after all is there nothing we can get that speaks to us of things we know and are familiar with, our own countryside, for instance?

Last week I caught the Sunday train north, and spent all day in the wine-like air of the Laurentians; the sky was clear aqua-green over the dazzling snow. As we idled along the ski trail we saw with joy the dark needles of the spruce trees standing in a mass against the green poplar stems and the great spreading fan-shaped elms, etched against the white hills. The vivid scarlets and other colours of the skiers' costumes made a pageant of youth and energy. This is really the happy hunting ground of our life to-day. Here in the north country I wonder if we realize how peculiarly clear the air is, and as a result of the brilliant light how much more intense the shadows are; at last the clear-cut shapes of the pointed spruce were creeping across the valley, and the afternoon sun

brought a violet tint to the sky, as the long horizontal banks of clouds contrasted with the sweep of the hills. The winter night rushed up and the dark sky was powdered with stars. Pleasantly tired and filled with a sense of well-being we relaxed in the warmth of the train.

Couldn't we bring some of all this back with us, capture it and preserve it, so that we might be refreshed in the dull stretches of the week? Could we find a painting of this? Why, that is the very thing for our empty wall space. I wonder has anyone noticed it?

Yes, some people have noticed it and loved it so much that they have given their lives to revealing it. They saw it years ago, and were impelled by the strange force of Art to search it out. What if they starved, or wandered about in a society that did not understand them, - they did not mind because they had the beauty of the land itself. Ever changing, never ending, the great reservoir of Nature was open to them, as she always has been to those who seek her.

Our love of landscape goes far back into our Anglo-Saxon past, from "Summer is a cumin in", the days of Chaucer and Shakespeare, "The green leaves of spring all a-singing", to the "Cloud" of Shelly, and "The Lakes" of Wordsworth, - the Scottish bards who draw our eyes and ears to the lochs and burns and wee birdies, until we walked with them in storm and sunshine into the heart of living things, and we cry with John Masefield, to-day:-

"Oh, my heart is fain to hear the soft wind sighing,
Soughing through the pine trees up on Northern fells.
Oh, my eyes they ache to see the young burns running,
Through the peaty soil and the purple heather bells."

And so in this setting we find John Constable, born in England,

-4-

in 1778, the son of a miller. Young constable was brought up in the beautiful country-side of East Bergholt, in Suffolk, and every morning as a lad he trudged to school and later to work in his father's mill, along those tree-lined lanes. He grew up to have a passionate love for the world of Nature as he found it, - bright and verdant, - and was fired with a desire to reveal it. He had the usual difficulties to surmount; the popular Art of the period was the portraiture of Reynolds and Gainsborough; but finally he emerged with the contention that the Landscape itself was sufficient for a painting. When a canvas of his, containing a house among a mass of great trees had the remark flung at it "That should be hung in the Architect's hall" his reply was, "But that is not a painting of a house but of a summer morning."

His early interest in Nature and Art was encouraged by a great amateur who happened to have his seat in the neighbouring county of Essex, and who was quick to recognize the talent of young Constable. Sir George Beaumont was something of a painter himself. He had been a pupil of Richard Wilson and he was an enthusiastic supporter of the Arts and artists. But patron, though he might be, he voices the level of the intelligence of the public of his day in regard to Art, when he made his famous remark, "A good picture, like a good fiddle, should be brown". It was against this prejudice that Constable aimed his attack, and through his quiet and deliberate research in the world of appearances, made a definite contribution, not only to British Art, but to the world of Painting as a whole.

In the age-long process by which the artist has steadily interpreted to us the world of appearances, Constable occupies an important

-5-

place, he added something to the European idiom of painting. He used the principles of Impressionism long before its definite appearance in France and states it quite clearly in his lectures by saying:- "The sky is not reflected in the water only, but also in the grass and in the stones, and again the grass is reflected in the tree trunks, and so forth". It is quite true that he never pushed this to the lengths that Monet and Pissaro and Sisley did fifty years later. He never discovered the range of Colour Chords which came from studying the effect of strong sunlight out of doors,- partly because his personal taste and feeling were towards more subdued effects,- under stormy skies or dull evenings. Within that range he has never been surpassed or even equalled. Nearly every one of his small studies is a discovery of some moment, when the tones and colours reveal themselves as suddenly brought together in a new and altogether unexpected harmony, and Constable is content to leave it at that. He is always discreet and self-effacing. He is never there to jog one's elbow and say:- "Don't you see how stunning this is," still less does he ever hint what a great man he is to have discovered it. He leaves us alone with his impression to make what we can of it,- to repeat in contemplating his picture the experience he had before Nature and to feel gradually the mood which comes from it,- a mood which is all the rarer and more moving in being far too subtle and too complicated to be defined,- for Constable refrains from doing anything to make it more explicit, or more effective. He knows that to touch it would limit or distort it. So he brings us out of the stuffy studio to the fresh and constantly changing scenes of the country. He had a great love of trees and with fine understanding draws the great branches, supporting

-6-

their plumed foliage in masses against silver skies. No one has seen, as he did, just the unique pinkish greyness of the slopes of the South Bownes. Take, for instance, the sketch on the slopes of the Stour Valley. However familiar one may be with the diversities of Nature, one could never have foretold the peculiar shade of warm yellowish grey which the meadows have taken here. It is late on an October afternoon, and the tempered sunlight falling on the grass bleached by summer heat, gives this strange and unexpected note, and Constable has made of it the basis for a harmony of the rarest kind. These warm greys melt by gradation as we follow them across the valley into the blue distance. The woods in the middle distance have lost their greens and taken on a yellowish-grey note, a deeper and stronger version of the pale fields, - here and there they flush faintly to a chestnut brown, - but all the colours are veiled by the film of air which intervenes. So rare a harmony could only be grasped by one whose contemplative spirit has always been patient and alert.

How strange that when the young Pre-Raphaelites were trying to escape from the horrors of Victorian picture-making, some sketch of Constable's did not whisper to them, "Here is the way to a genuine and unexplored art."

But 100 years later a group of painters in Canada heard its whisper and benefitted by it, and in the light of Constable's revelation set out to seek the same truths in their own land. The story of Canadian Landscape Painting is a story of struggle and splendid courage. You can imagine in a country like ours with its rigorous climate and vast distances just how little thought or interest could be afforded to anything as impractical as Art, - yet that rare figure of the artist appears at

-7-

every stage of our development, seizes and preserves for us conditions of life in whatever period he comes. He lives unknown, often ignored, but when Time puts the value on a country's activities, his work shall take its place in the record of our struggle on the road to a finer understanding of the World surrounding us. And to-day the famous Tate gallery of London houses an exhibition covering the whole field of Canadian Painting. Those who have studied and enjoyed their work, whether they come from Canada or from Europe have learned to see anew through it the free pure spirit of our Country's fine beauty. It is about some of them that I shall talk during the next six weeks, at this time.

I wonder how many of you could name six, or even three, of the most outstanding of our Canadian Painters. Why not? Try. Meanwhile I shall begin next week with Paul Kane. He slips into place as our pioneer artist.

I hope you will see, as the series goes on, how naturally our landscape painting has grown out of an older tradition, and yet has set up a real character for itself. For it is born of our snow and rocks, lakes and forests, their air and winds, their silence and distance.